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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION; IRAQ AND THE US FINANCIAL CRISIS; THE IRAQ WAR; CUBA; THE FARC AND DRUG TRAFFICKING; 03/25/08

11. SUMMARY STATEMENT

Weekend papers carry opinion pieces and editorials linked to the relationship between the Iraq war and the current US financial crisis; press freedom in Cuba; and the FARC, negotiations for hostage release and drug trafficking.

12. OPINION PIECES AND EDITORIALS

- "Iraq and the financial crisis - the same thread"

Leading "Clarín" carries an op-ed piece by international analyst Oscar Raúl Cardoso, who opines (03/22) "In the universe of politics, parallel lines do not exist as they do in geometry. They are an exception, not the rule. If one pays close attention, one will find out that those lines will always (sooner or later) converge on one point. There is not one domestic or international issue that can be separated from many others. This is what happens in the US regarding the war in Iraq... and the US financial economic crisis. Both issues are united by a complex network of public funds and for being part of George W. Bush's eight-year-long heritage."

".... The president believes the time has come to reestablish the idea of a possible victory in Iraq and reveal a circumstantial slump in violence as a result of a right decision from his administration to raise the number of US troops just one year ago, and General David Petraeus' successful management of the war.

".... Every forecast hints that a recession in the US is already inevitable... Some economists say it is possible that, to some extent, the current situation could be worse than that of the '29 crisis because the real entry to the Big Depression was not that year but during the '30/'31 period, which was marked by the downfall of financial institutions. It will not be long before society will connect the parallels of its economy and the 'craze' of the Iraq war. However, even so, a solution is unlikely to be found. The situation created by the invasion is such that it seems almost impossible that a US president (no matter what his/her political affiliation is) could easily get rid of the Persian Gulf's 'poisoned' sands."

- "Five years and counting"

An editorial in liberal, English-language "Buenos Aires Herald" reads (03/21) "... An easy war of just three weeks has been followed by a hard peace. Five years of the superpower's presence in Iraq is almost as long as the time the US was involved in both world wars combined (66 months) and while the death toll has been lighter (just under 4,000), it is traumatic enough for today's world.

"The financial cost has been much more colossal: several hundred billion dollars or even trillions according to some estimates. So

staggering indeed that the frequent cynicism as to its being a war for oil becomes increasingly difficult to sustain - even with oil at over 100 dollars a barrel, the cost-benefit analysis fails to stand up...

"Yet for all the cost, US President George W. Bush's bullish speech to mark the five years on Wednesday was not bereft of either political or objective logic. Iraq today is a better place than either in 2003 under Saddam or in 2007 at the peak of the violence. Because of the improved war management under General David Petraeus..., the continuing anti-war majority in the US now co-exists with an optimistic majority and the presumptive Republican presidential candidate John McCain could move several points ahead of his Democratic rivals in the polls while saying that he was ready to stay '100 years' in Iraq if necessary.

"But McCain's own blunder in describing Shiite Iran as a training-ground for the fundamentalist Sunni terrorists of Al Qaeda shows how little the US understands Iraq where trust and cohesion are still lacking between its Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish communities, thus barring any final optimism. And it also underlines how the Iraq involvement to remove Saddam has become a porch to conflict with Iran.

"Five years and still no exit strategy."

- "Cuba's long gloomy spring"

An editorial in daily-of-record "La Nacion" reads (03/21) "With the war on Iraq as a backdrop, the Cuban regime imprisoned 75 political dissidents in March 2003. 55 of them are still in prison and one of them died. 29 of them were independent journalists.

"Five years after that raid, Raul Castro should release the 20 journalists still in prison..."

"Cuba is one of the countries having largest censorship in the world. The Cuban Communist Party controls the reporters' work through the Department for Revolutionary Orientation..."

"Cuba is second to China with respect to the greatest number of imprisoned journalists..."

"... We all hope that, given the gradual opening Raul Castro is suggesting, independent journalists and political dissidents imprisoned in March 2003 will recover their freedom immediately and under no conditions whatsoever. It is not tolerable that a regime like Cuba's boasted at the UN about having signed deals related to the respect for human rights and then did not abide by them.

"The international community should join efforts and pressure further, if necessary, so that something as essential as the guarantee and respect for freedom of expression is one of the first steps to be taken by the revisited regime in its road towards a democracy..."

- "Drugs, the FARC's real threat"

Business-financial "Ambito Financiero" (03/25) "If someone believed that the 'soap opera' among the FARC, Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia had met its final point in the virtuous OAS resolutions and the recent foreign ministerial summit, he was wrong.

"The saga continues, and as it often happens, what started as a tragedy continues like a farce..."

"Hugo Chavez, the big loser until last week, received involuntary help from the US Department of State, which did not have a better idea than using what happened to insist again on its oft-rejected theory of flexible borders, with a right to chase insurgents, no matter if they enter the territory of other States..."

"Nicolas Sarkozy is analyzing a plan based on negotiating with the FARC (doing away with a devalued Chavez) through French Guyana, and has proposed the release of 36 hostages to be chosen by France in return for the release of nothing less than 500 FARC members, today in Colombian prisons... plus two high-ranking guerrilla leaders

currently under indictment in the US... All of Europe would stop labeling FARC a 'terrorist organization.'

"Of course, the central issue (after the hostage issue) is still ignored by many foreign ministries, including that of Argentina - drug consumption and money laundering are alarmingly increasing in our countries and the huge amount of drugs poisoning our youth is manufactured by the FARC and the drug traffickers protected by them. However, and even if you cannot believe it, Argentina continues to avoid condemning the FARC."

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